Chapter 1

Administration

Staffing

1.1 This is the third year since our delinking from Government systems and procedures. The last reporting year ended with our Office being staffed by 76 or 83% contract officers appointed under The Ombudsman Ordinance. We have since maintained our momentum in recruitment. By 31 March 2004, only five or 5.7% of my entire workforce of 88 were civil servants. They will all return to Government within 2004.

Fig. 1.1

Contract Staff in the Office (as at 31 March)

	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
Contract Staff	11 (13.2%)	16 (17.8%)	58 (59.2%)	76 (83.0%)	83 (94.3%)
Civil Servants	80 (86.8%)	74 (82.2%)	40 (40.8%)	16 (17.0%)	5 (5.7%)
Total	91	90	98	92	88

1.2 Meanwhile, we provide for continuity in the Office by maintaining a team of about 40 contract investigation officers with experience and expertise. We also offer opportunities to staff for career development. For example, in February 2004, two Complaints Assistants, hitherto deployed only on enquiries and telephone complaints, were transferred to investigation teams to assist in processing complaints. The aim is to provide training to the Complaints Assistants so that they could be able to take up investigation duties in future. It also helps broaden their outlook and enhance their exposure to prepare them for a career in the Office. Such arrangements would allow this Office to groom officiers with potential.

1.3 To cater for seasonal fluctuation of caseload and for specific projects, we continued to employ temporary and part-time staff to supplement the regular task force. For example, we have engaged one such officer to review our procedures, practices and operational guidelines. Others have helped to process individual cases or direct investigations.

Staff Training

1.4 Since early 2003, we have recruited ten more contract investigation staff, bringing the strength of such staff to 36 in the reporting year. New recruits undergo induction and on-the-job training to help them settle in and to make for quality assurance in investigative functions. Staff training is particularly important to maintain an adequate level of expertise and experience at a time when the only assurance from the Administration is steady reduction of resources in the years ahead.

1.5 For induction, we attach new entrants to different units to familiarise them with the different aspects of our services: e.g. screening of complaints and deciding on modes of processing. For on-the-job training, senior officers guide and advise them in their day-to-day performance. In time, we will rotate them to different jobs to sharpen their skills and develop their potential.

1.6 Weekly team meetings are instructive in sharing experience and exchanging ideas. Where specific issues warrant special sessions, we organise open forum for airing of problems or queries and for dissemination of ideas and information. The Ombudsman attends these occasions from time to time

to have direct dialogue with staff, to impart her philosophy and to clarify her stance on various issues.

1.7 To enhance professionalism and to acquire new skills, we invite experts to address our staff or to design and tailor-make courses. This year, we commissioned the Hong Kong Mediation Council for techniques in mediation and the Whole Person Development Institute for skills in communication with complainants requiring special attention.

1.8 To optimise training opportunities and to facilitate mutual understanding, we made places available on the mediation course to a number of departments particularly prone to public complaints. These were Food and Environmental Hygiene Department, Post Office, Home Affairs Department, Housing Department and Transport Department. Our aim is to encourage departments to make greater use of mediation in resolving disputes and handling complaints. Feedback on this from the departments was generally favourable.

Maximising Resources

1.9 Since delinking, we operate on a lump-sum grant for meeting staffing and day-to-day expenses. In keeping with the Administration's determination to cut public expenditure, our provision for 2004/05 will be reduced by 6.8%.

1.10 To ensure the financial viability of the Office, we have implemented firm measures to economise and to contain expenditure. These include continuing review of the organisation and staffing structure, introduction of multi-tasking and combined grades, award of increments only on merit and employment of temporary or part-time staff for seasonal or sudden rise in caseload. Every effort is made to ensure efficient staffing for quality output.

1.11 As staffing expenses account for over 80% of our overall expenditure, we had initiated a review of our existing pay structure for maximum cost-effectiveness in the years ahead. Key elements for examination were the levels of cash allowance and the award of increments on renewal of contract. The ultimate aim is to ensure adequate resources for the future, maintain continuity of service, stability of staffing and reasonable career opportunities for staff, even in the face of financial stringencies.

Complaints against the Office

1.12 This year, we received and concluded 11 complaints against staff or against our procedures, three more than last year. To some extent, this may be a measure of growing awareness of our services and rising expectations of our community. Whether or not such complaints suggest defects or deficiencies in the performance of our Office, we take them most seriously. We value each and every one as an opportunity to review our judgment and procedures, and where necessary, revise practices to improve our operations.

1.13 At times, complaints against our staff stem from dissatisfaction with the outcome or simply disappointment over The Ombudsman's decision of a case. This is inevitable: we investigate to establish facts about fair administration but at times, complainants seek recompense, or even retribution, and these are beyond our purview.

Fig. 1.2

Complaints against the Office Concluded in 2003/04

Nature	Substantiated	Partially substantiated	Unsubstantiated	Incapable of determination
Staff manners (including delay and negligence)	1	2	7	–
Procedures	–	1	–	–
Total	11			

Protection against SARS

1.14 The SARS outbreak in early 2003 called for everyone in the community to make conscientious and concerted efforts to contain the spread of the virus. To protect our staff and visitors to our Office, we introduced a number of preventive measures during this critical period including: –

- wearing protective facemasks ourselves; and
- providing visitors with facemasks and disposable wet towels with disinfectant.

1.15 For regular and longer-term precaution, an infra red camera has been installed at our reception area since early 2004 for detecting visitors with higher than normal body temperature. These visitors will be received with special care.

Staff Suggestion Scheme

1.16 To encourage staff to make suggestions for enhancing operational efficiency and effectiveness, we have introduced a staff suggestion scheme this year to award those colleagues who offer practical ideas for improving or streamlining our systems and procedures. The scheme aims at –

- making better use of energy or time, resources and materials;
- improving utilisation of equipment;
- simplifying office practices and procedures;
- attaining greater professionalism and higher efficiency by strengthening staff relations and raising staff morale; and
- ensuring occupational health and safety, office security, quality of service or output.

1.17 Suggestions will be considered by a panel comprising the Deputy Ombudsman, Assistant Ombudsmen and the Chief Executive Officer.

1.18 Meritorious suggestions are presented awards in cash or certificates of commendation, or both, depending on their efficacy upon adoption by The Ombudsman.